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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the experience of Caribbean countries in striving to achieve quality in early childhood development programs. Part 1 reviews the needs of developing children and the dimensions of quality in early childhood programs intended to meet those needs. Included in the discussion is the use of Developmentally Appropriate Practice guidelines as a basis for standards, indicators of quality, specialized staff training, specific curriculum training, parent involvement, and the early childhood curriculum. Part 2 discusses factors which affect early childhood program quality within the region, highlighting problems with applying quality standards from affluent countries to programs in developing countries. Part 3 poses issues pertaining to quality within different cultural, social, and economic contexts, and the need to rethink quality so it becomes a less elusive goal for programs. Included are discussions of recent efforts to develop locally relevant standards, the results of studies of day care programs in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, and current problems, such as large group sizes, inadequately trained staff, insufficient play materials and equipment, inappropriate teaching strategies, and poor teacher-child interactions. Part 4 provides examples of how developing countries can achieve relative quality in programs which benefit children's development positively. Recommendations include improving in teacher training, examining the experiences of other developing countries in Latin America, and increasing regional collaboration and networking to share resources and expertise. (Contains 29 references.) (KB)

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STRIVING FOR QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES: THE CARIBBEAN EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

The rapid expansion in early childhood development programmes throughout the world in the last two decades, attests to a growing recognition that preschool intervention programmes have the potential to contribute in significant ways to the enhancement of children's development and capacity for learning from their earliest years. Research continues to expand this knowledge base and internationally, studies confirm that good preschool programmes improve children's health and nutrition status as well as their mental and psycho-social development. Two findings with far reaching implications are that children from low income families derive greater benefits from early intervention programmes than their better off peers, and that high quality programmes produce positive long term effects on development throughout adulthood.(Rutter 1981; Zigler and Gordon 1982; Clarke -Stewart and Fein 1983; Berrutta-Clement et al, 1984; McGuire and Austin 1987; Myers, Weikart 1992). More recently, the Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children (Carnegie, 1994) has compiled evidence emerging from extensive research on brain development, which establishes a strong link between stimulating early learning environments and rapid growth of brain cells and expanded brain functions in young children. Access to an early childhood programme however, is not an automatic guarantee

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of improved development outcomes for children. It is the quality of the individual programme environment which makes the difference.

Concern for quality has become a topical issue in many local and regional fora on early childhood programming. Sponsors- public or private- increasingly seek assurance that their investment in these services ultimately justifies the cost and achieves the overall objective of improving human capital. "Quality" is the critical factor which underpins this assurance. The work of several researchers has been instrumental in defining the construct of "quality" and in identifying the key indicators or elements of this attribute in early childhood programmes. A high quality programme is one which effectively combines the operational dimensions associated with good service provision to create optimal conditions for early childhood care and development. Optimal programme quality not surprisingly, is difficult to achieve and maintain even in affluent societies. In the United States of America the " Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes" Study which observed childcare and preschool quality in several states, found that few programmes were able to fully satisfy the established criteria for good programme quality.. The study revealed that a mere 15% of early childhood programmes in the study sample were considered to be of good quality and an alarming 35 to 40 % of infants were cared for in unsafe settings(Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team 1995). The challenge of maintaining quality programmes is far greater for developing countries which have fewer resources at their disposal.

This paper critically examines the experience of Caribbean countries in striving to achieve

quality in early childhood development programmes. The paper will: a) briefly review the needs of developing children and the dimensions of quality in early childhood programmes that are intended to meet these needs; b) discuss the factors which affect early childhood programme quality within the region citing examples from regional studies; c) pose issues pertaining to the relativity of quality within different cultural, social and economic contexts, and the need to rethink local and regional understandings about quality so that it becomes a less elusive goal for many programmes; d) provide examples of how developing countries can achieve relative quality in programmes which benefit children's development in positive ways.

Some Universal Needs of Children

Any meaningful discussion on what constitutes quality programmes for young children must begin with a clear understanding of the needs of the children these programmes aim to meet. Children universally have similar basic needs which must be met to enable them to grow and develop healthily. These encompass the need for: good health care and proper nutrition; security and protection from danger; intellectual stimulation through interaction with others and play involving a wide range of materials and experiences; love and affection from warm caring adults; social experiences with other children; opportunities to explore and discover, opportunities for self expression; opportunities to be independent and opportunities to experience success.

The environment which surrounds the child from birth determines the extent to which these needs might or might not be satisfactorily met. Home and preschools are the most critical learning environments for young children as, with few exceptions, their waking hours are

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mostly spent shifting between both. Early childhood services, besides supporting the child care needs of families, often have to compensate for gaps in the child's development which result from the deficiencies of the home environment. For this reason, programmes serving children from poor circumstances have an even greater responsibility to ensure high quality inputs that can both compensate for inadequacies and enhance child development. This is of particular relevance to the region since according to World Bank statistics of 1996, 1 in 3 CARICOM nationals lives in poverty(World Bank, 1996).

Dimensions of quality in early childhood programmes.

What are the dimensions of programme quality to which reference has repeatedly been made?. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has developed guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) which assure quality in early childhood programmes for children from birth through eight years (Bredekamp 1991). The DAP guidelines are internationally regarded as representing consensus on what constitutes appropriate practice in environments for young children, although there are critics who consider the guidelines as insensitive to cultural diversity in children's family experiences and parenting practices(Woodhead 1996, cited in Evans, 1996). Schweinhart (1995), in a paper on quality, lists standards of early childhood programme quality which parallel those of the DAP guidelines and Harms and Clifford(1980) developed an Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) which is widely used in the United States and other countries. These sets of standards are grounded in a strong base of research on the effects of specific elements of early childhood programmes on various aspects of young children's development.

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The dimensions of programme quality fall into two categories, the structural or static and the dynamic. The structural or static dimension includes such factors as physical facilities, space per child, physical room arrangement and availability of appropriate materials and equipment, arrangements for meeting children's basic physical care, health and nutritional needs, group size and ratio of teachers/caregivers to children and teacher qualifications. The dynamic dimension covers those programme aspects that are more concerned with process, the elements more often sensed than seen such as, the climate of social interaction between adults and children, children and children and adults and adults; the curriculum process in particular the hidden aspects; parent staff relations and other such features. The dynamic dimension is far more important than the static in determining child development outcomes. However, static features of a programme environment do influence the nature of interactions between adults and children, hence they affect the dynamic environment and ultimately children's developmental progress.

What research tells us about the dimensions of quality in early childhood environments

Research evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the more elements of quality a programme includes, the more effectively it is able to support positive child development.

Adult-child ratio, group size and space per child have been found to be important indicators of quality. High staff -child ratio and small group size are positively correlated with advanced communication skills, verbal intelligence, sociability, task orientation, co-operation and more nurturant and non- restrictive adult-child behaviour.(McCartney 1984; Phillips, Scarr and McCartney 1987; Cummings and Beagles- Ross 1983; Howes and Rubenstein 1985; Ruopp et al 1979;).

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When adults have too many children in their charge, there is likely to be much less verbal interaction and social exchange between adult and child and consequently less benefits accruing to the child. The conclusions and recommendations from research have led many developed countries to set standards limiting group size for 3-5 year olds to ranges between 16 and 24 children with a ratio of 1 adult to 10 or 12 children; for toddlers 1:8 with maximum group size of 15 and 1:4 or for infants with maximum group size of 8. In developing countries of the Caribbean, the situation is vastly different because staff -child ratio is a primary determinant of cost and in the context of limited resources, adult -child ratio is generally much lower.

Specialized Staff training

Specialized training for staff is a significant element of quality in early childhood programme environments. Young children need skilled and competent teachers/caregivers to guide their development as much as or perhaps more than at any other level. Several research studies have established the importance of specialized child development training and general educational level of adults who work with young children. Specialized training is associated with more positive adult-child interaction, helpfulness, encouragement, less restrictive behaviour and less punitiveness, promotion of verbal skills and higher social and cognitive competence in children. (Howes 1983; Stalling and Porter 1980; Arnett 1987; Berk 1985; Clarke-Stewart and Gruber 1984).

Specific curriculum training through staff in-service programmes and follow -up support has also been shown in the High Scope experience to be most successful in promoting programme quality. This kind of systematic training in the specifics of curriculum implementation is

especially important where possession of professional credentials by teachers is not widespread, a common phenomenon within the region. An evaluation of the High Scope Teacher Training model found that teachers who received systematic training in curriculum practice scored significantly better than comparable teachers without such training and that the children in their classrooms scored significantly higher than children in comparison classrooms in initiative, social relations, music and movement and overall development(Schweinhart 1995).

The early childhood curriculum which guides day to day activities is another important element of a quality programme. By the DAP standards such a curriculum is learner- centered, promotes child-initiated, discovery and interactive learning, employs instructional approaches that are embedded in the child's natural love for play and takes into account the child's current skill levels and experiences. There are several well- known validated curricula in use in early childhood programmes throughout the world e.g the Montessori model, the Bank Street model, the High Scope model among others. In our situation many programmes devise their own eclectic mix of curriculum strategies drawing on a variety of models.

Involvement of parents is an essential feature of high quality, supportive early childhood programmes. Such programmes are sensitive to families' needs and facilitate parent development in improving child rearing knowledge and skills. Parents in turn play substantially supporting roles in several aspects of programme activities. Good parent -teacher/caregiver relations serve to reinforce positive child development principles and practices in both home and and early childhood development settings.

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Quality in Context

It might be useful in this discussion of quality in the Caribbean context, to make reference to an article by Judith Evans (1996) entitled, "Quality in ECCD: Everyone's Concern". This article synthesizes several writers' views on the issue of quality and standards in early childhood settings. Of particular interest to our situation are the views of Woodhead (1996), and Schweinhart, (1995) which she presents. In attempting to define quality, Woodhead distinguishes between basic needs which are internal to the child (i.e satisfy inner drives) and socially constructed needs which are associated with social adaptation, goal achievement and acquisition of desired skills and values. He suggests that universal consensus on children's basic needs presents few problems, however it is more difficult to achieve such consensus on socially constructed needs because these are culturally determined.

For this reason Woodhead is critical of developing countries applying to their situations, standards for quality which originate from the affluent circumstances of developed countries in the western world. Even with some adaptation such standards might be difficult for the majority of early childhood programmes in developing countries to achieve(my emphasis). Woodhead suggests that judgements of quality should be contextual and take into account " the belief, knowledge and values, which relate to particular cultural, familial and institutional contexts and aspirations for childhood"(cited in Evans, 1996 p. 10.) He cautions however, that despite the multiplicity of perspectives, quality itself should not be arbitrary but carefully negotiated to represent what is ultimately beneficial to the child in the early childhood environment within the

particular socio-cultural context..

Schweinhart, 1995, in addressing the issue of quality as it applies to the different circumstances of countries, suggests that it is important to specify early childhood programme quality both in ideal and relative terms. Ideal programme quality includes those programme elements that optimize young children's development . Relative programme quality includes dimensions on which programmes surpass the typical settings in which young children spend their time. He states that while programmes should strive for ideal quality, limitations of money or caregiver education in a given situation might require programmes to settle for some relative level of quality. He however encourages programmes to strive to achieve high quality even if obstacles prohibit the full realization of some dimensions of it. For example in spite of large class sizes efforts should be made to maintain a curriculum based on child-initiated learning activities.

Striving for Quality:The Caribbean Experience.

Since the early 1970's a variety of early childhood programme models have emerged within the region in response to the growing need of working mothers to access early childhood care and education. Presently, these programmes provide services for children from birth through 6 years in centre type and home based facilities. The majority of these provisions are privately run services as most Governments are only minimally involved in service delivery but usually play a central role in regulatory and monitoring functions through one or more Ministries. As the number and range of services have grown over the last decade, so has the concern for quality and maintaining minimum standards of operation

In the region, the approach to establishing standards has typically been to borrow and slightly adapt standards developed for North American societies rather than generate indigenous criteria for standards which take into account the social, economic and cultural circumstances of countries. Myers (1992), expresses the concern that internationally, "early childhood programmes more often than not are taking their cues from imported models that reinforce value shifts towards the individualistic, production-oriented cultures of the West"(p.29) The result of this approach in Caribbean countries has been a continuous mismatch between the set standards and the level at which services actually operate. Only recently have there been genuine efforts by some countries to develop standards that are more relevant to local circumstances. Perhaps this has come about because evaluative studies and programme reviews over the years have reflected the inability of the majority of day care and preschool programmes to maintain even at the minimum required level the standards set for providing quality services. While relative quality on one or two dimensions is evidenced in some programmes, the majority experience difficulty achieving the standards for most of the dimensions of quality.

The Real Challenges

Since 1993, three major studies on early childhood provision at the national level, have been undertaken in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago. These are the" Evaluation of Day Care Services in Jamaica" (1993), commissioned by the Caribbean Child Development Centre, U.W.I, and the "Evaluation Report on the Early Childhood Education Programme in Jamaica"(1995), commissioned by the Ministry of Education Youth and Culture. Both studies were led by Dr. Kerida McDonald, Early Childhood consultant. The Trinidad & Tobago study is the recent

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"Trinidad and Tobago Early Childhood Survey"(1995) carried out by The High Scope Educational Research Foundation on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the World Bank. In the ensuing discussion, data references will be drawn mainly from these three studies, which have yielded findings that typify the experiences of other countries within the region. This is not surprising given their shared historical, cultural, social and economic heritage.

In the Caribbean region countries have in the last decade, made remarkable progress in expanding coverage and improving physical facilities in early childhood programme provisions. Table 1 demonstrates the increase in the number of programmes in some countries of the region, between 1980 and 1990. The table shows four countries to have more than tripled coverage while the others have either doubled coverage or are close to doing so.

The pursuit of good programme quality has not been approached with similar zeal. This is due perhaps to a prevailing lack of understanding among policy makers and the wider public, of the fundamental value of good quality early childhood experiences to the individual's later educational and social achievements. In countries of the region, the percentage budget expenditure on early childhood programmes is miniscule (range 0.1 - 3.0 %) compared to expenditure on primary and higher levels of education. Many still believe that "it all begins at Grade 1". Barbados, Grenada and Guyana are notable exceptions where government support for the total early childhood system (birth to 6 years) is much better than average within the region. In the other countries, expenditure on early childhood provisions have been channelled

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Table 1

Increase in ECE Programme Pr ovisions in Selected Caribbean Countries 1980-1990

Country	No. of Programmes in 1980	No. of Programmes in 1990
Antigua- Barbuda	32	50
Belize	24	81 (1994 data)
Dominica	54	66
Grenada	87*	121*
Jamaica	1500	2000 (1993 data)
Montserrat	n/a-	15
St. Lucia	45	167
St. Kitts	23	42
St. Vincent	37	71
Trinidad & Tobago	50**	148**
Total	1820	2761

* Grenada- includes infant departments of primary schools

** Trinidad&Tobago- public centres only

Source: Davies, R. " UNICEF in the Eastern Caribbean- 1979 to the Present " UNICEF, Barbados, 1986

" " Caribbean Journal of Education, Vol 17, No 2 Sep 1995, p 204

High Scope/World Bank- The Trinidad & Tobago Early Childhood Survey 1995

mainly to the preschool sector (ages 3-6) while programmes for under 3 year olds (day care) remain underfunded and very inadequate to meet public demand. The private sector is still the dominant provider of day care services and often the user fees for these services are far beyond what poor families can afford.

Table 2 presents selected data from the three studies previously cited, in an attempt to demonstrate the current status of early childhood programmes with respect to certain dimensions of quality. The inconsistent format of the table results from the differences in the

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approach to data collection and analysis of the studies done in the two different countries. While in the Trinidad & Tobago study data for private and public services were consistently disaggregated, this was not always the case for the Jamaican studies. No data were available for day care in the Trinidad study. The table should therefore be regarded not for its symetry or consistency of data but rather as an attempt to synthesize and present the available supporting information relevant to the topic under discussion.

The eleven programme aspects which appear in Table 2 were selected simply because the data were available. They do however represent very critical aspects of programming which impact on quality. In a previous section of this paper, group size was shown to be an important determinant of quality. The table shows that large group sizes of 3-5 year old children were observed in both Trinidad and Jamaica, although some programmes reported smaller group sizes. It is a reality in the Caribbean, that demand is much greater than supply of early childhood programmes and typically, overcrowding which leads to large group size occurs. Group sizes of 45 to 50 five olds with one teacher are often reported from the field. The table shows child/adult ratios for 3-5 year olds ranging between 26:1 and 40:1, certainly in excess of standards which constitute developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programmes. In situations where a single teacher is faced with a large group of demanding young children, the prevalence of teacher -dominated classroom interaction is

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Table 2

: Status of ECE Programmes in Trinidad & Tobago and Jamaica by Selected Dimensions of Quality (1995)

DIMENSIONS OF QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMMES	TRINIDAD&TOBAGO ECE PROGRAMMES		JAMAICA- ECE PROGRAMMES	
	Public P.S .(n=28)	PrivateP.S (n=29)	(n=169)All Preschools	All Day Care(n=58)
1. Group size 3-5 yr olds (largest observed)	38	31	40+	not available
2. Child/adult ratio	38:1	26:1	40:1	" "
3. % of programmes with at least one of a prescribed list of play materials	50+	50+	40	" "
4. % trained staff	79	35	not available	50 (at different levels)
5. % untrained staff	21	56.7	" "	50
6. % of programmes with inadequately equipped outdoor play areas	50	50	22	n.a
7. % programmes with mostly whole group teaching approaches.	72	60	49	n.a
8.% programmes with inappropriate teacher controlled environments	32	87	n.a	n.a
9. % programmes with inappropriate practices/strategies/ activities for children	22	80	24	43
10. % programmes with evidence of affection and warmth in teacher behaviour	1	2	39	71
11. % parent participation in programmes	76	58	52	67

Sources: 1. Evaluation of Day Care Services in Jamaica--K McDonald, J Brown CCDC 1993
2. Evaluation Report on The Early Childhood Education Programme in Jamaica— K. McDonald, 1995
3. The Trinidad and Tobago Early Childhood Survey --High Scope Educational — High Scope Educational Foundation/Ministry of Education, Trinidad 1995

not unexpected. Teacher attitudes are also negatively affected as stern and authoritarian rather than warm, supportive responses to children become the natural aids to survival.

The difficulty is further compounded by inadequately trained staff and insufficient play materials and equipment for children to interact with. Table 2 reveals that in both these instances many programmes fall short of desirable standards. Although 79% and 50% respectively, of Trinidadian and Jamaican teachers are reported as trained, the reality is that the training itself is generally inadequate to effectively prepare individuals for the job. Training periods for individual staff vary and might range from two weeks to two years or more. It is to be noted also that private facilities which are in the majority, have fewer trained staff than public facilities. Limitations in training and general educational standard, affect teachers' ability to promote critical thinking in children through effective use of questioning and meaningful conversations with children. Both country studies reported teachers' low ratings in these areas.

With respect to provisions for children's play and other developmental activities, the table shows that roughly half the programmes in both countries do not make adequate provisions for this most vital aspect of children's experiences. Outdoor play areas are seldom adequately equipped as the Trinidad & Tobago Survey reports: " Outdoor play yards with

safe, adequate equipment were typically not available or not used. When available, play yards were poorly equipped"(p.1-2). Other materials for children's use were also not adequately supplied. Although programmes in the Trinidad & Tobago study reported having at least one of a prescribed list of different categories of play materials, the researchers noted that, "the median number of items per centre (both public and private) was consistently low" and that there were "few dramatic play items, science/nature materials, media materials and large muscle items available for children's use"(p.6-12). The equivalent situation obtained in the Jamaica studies where it was observed that of 25 types of learning materials found in facilities, only 5 were in moderate to good supply and these were the more formal kinds of materials such as chalk, reading books, crayons, materials for counting and number work. Seventy-one % of environments observed received very poor ratings in the category of free form and natural materials which encourage child -initiated activity e.g. puzzles, clothes and props for role play, paints, glue, scissors and the like.

Items # 7, 8, 9 in Table 2 relate to the methods and strategies that adults employ in the learning environment. Appropriate early learning environments allow children freedom to learn at their individual pace, pursue their own interests and interact with adults and a wide range of materials in ways which enhance and build positive dispositions to learning. The data in Table 2 point to a high incidence of whole group teaching, teacher selected and directed activities and inappropriate teaching strategies and emphases for young children . Teacher warmth and affection toward children represent the dynamic dimensions of the environment and their presence can often compensate for many of the inadequacies of the

static dimensions. Regrettably, the studies in both countries highlighted the low incidence or almost total absence of this programme dimension. The Jamaican study refers to the "rough handling of children by teachers, high level of corporal punishment and generally low level of positive reinforcement."(p.69), while the Trinidad & Tobago study reports:

" only minimal percentages of observation fell in the categories of nurturance/expression of affect or personal.....one(1) private centre teacher had 15% of her entries in the category of 'engaging in affectionate/friendly behaviour', while nearly all of the other public and private teachers exhibited little or none of this behaviour"(p.9-2). .

Finally, the table shows that **parent involvement in programmes** is an area which is becoming stronger with participation of parents ranging between 52% and 76%. While we cannot assess the actual content of such activities, it is heartening that providers recognize the importance of parent and family collaboration to overall programme quality. Certainly, the work of institutions such as the Caribbean Child Development Centre in Jamaica, Servol in Trinidad & Tobago and Paredos in Barbados among others, have and continue to influence this forward progression in the area of parent involvement and education.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The increase in parent participation augurs well for the future as ultimately it is the working together of parents and teachers that will generate the creative ideas for gradually eliminating the obstacles to achieving and maintaining quality programmes. The economic circumstances of most countries in the region make it unlikely that in the immediate future

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there will be any dramatic and widespread upward movement in the low levels of government budgetary expenditure on early childhood care and education. It is my view that for some time to come, many countries in the region will continue to grapple with issues of insufficient service provisions, large group size, high child adult ratios, insufficient play materials and other inadequacies of the static aspects of the early childhood programme environment which have major financial implications. I suggest that the emphasis in the short term should be on improving those areas of the dynamic dimensions of programming which can make a meaningful difference to programme quality and child development outcomes inspite of the existing inadequacies.

From this perspective, improvement in teacher training systems demands the most urgent attention. If care is taken to provide early childhood practitioners with carefully developed, appropriately sequenced and comprehensive competency based programmes of training, they might develop over time more profound understandings of the process of child development and their adult role in enhancing it. The need for showing love, support, warmth and affection to children as they learn and the need to use developmentally appropriate strategies, activities and experiences to stimulate children's interest in learning would become an integral aspect of teacher behaviour, better understood and more positively applied than was evident from the studies discussed in this paper. This depth of understanding of good child development principles and practices is not widespread among a high proportion of early childhood practitioners in the region. However, there are signs of positive change.

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Already in Trinidad and Jamaica the process of improving early childhood teacher/caregiver training and accreditation systems is well on the way, supported in the main through World Bank and UNICEF projects as well as other local organizations. It is often said that the quality of a programme is as good as the quality of its staff. I strongly believe that inspite of other deficiencies, well trained and competent teachers/caregivers can significantly increase the overall effectiveness of early childhood programmes that enhance childhood development.

Another suggestion relevant to future directions is that countries in the region should examine and learn from the experiences of other developing countries that have been able to implement programmes of relative quality with some consistency. Such programmes have departed from the general tendency to reproduce North American models and have instead tried approaches that blend more naturally into the local cultural, social and economic context. Robert Myers (1992) in his book " The Twelve Who Survive", describes extensively the achievements of some of these programmes in Latin America and other developing countries of the world. He stresses the need for an integrated approach to developing early childhood services as children's needs for protection, food, health care, affection,interaction, stimulation, security and play occur and interact together. He asserts: " A supportive environment will respond to all a child's needs which will, however, be defined somewhat differently and given different priorities by different cultures"(p.41), and advises that "programmes should support and build upon local ways that have been devised to cope effectively with problems of child care and development." (P.92).

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The key to the success of indigenous models is that the programmes do not necessarily evolve from the education community but often from the health, nutrition or social welfare communities. Such programmes build in the psycho-social aspects of child development and as such become truly integrated models of child development services . An Indian example is the Integrated Child Development Service(ICDS), started by the government in 1975 to improve the quality of life for poor children ages 0-6 and their mothers. It is estimated that the ICDS has reached over 11million children . The service is provided through 'anganwadi' centres (open courtyards) and provide supplementary feeding and preschool educational activities to groups of 20-40 children, 3hours per day.. The Preschool Feeding Programme (PROAPE) in Brazil is a somewhat similar programme which provides for poor children (4-6 years), food, vitamin supplements, supervised psychomotor activities, health checks, dental treatment, vaccinations and visual exams.

Variations on these programmes exist in Columbia, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador and Kenya. The research evidence from Mexico, Guatemala and Columbia on child development interventions which originate in the nutrition/ health community, show that children achieve developmental gains in areas of school readiness, physical growth and social adjustment (cited in Myers, 1992.p 234-236). The lesson to be learned here is that early childhood intervention programmes as we traditionally regard them, can have different origins, different areas of focus but yet be sufficiently integrated to address children's developmental needs in all areas. In this regard, relative quality becomes both achievable and sustainable as it involves only adding on desirable components to what already exists. In the Caribbean

components to what already exists. In the Caribbean region not enough effort is put into building integrated programmes which originate from social service bases other than education. However, at the Second Regional Conference on Early Childhood Education held in Barbados in April, 1997, over 300 delegates from 19 countries endorsed a regional Plan of Action which considers among other initiatives for advancing Early Childhood Care Education and Development in the region, the need for more integrated service delivery approaches.

The third activity focus for the immediate future should be that of increasing regional collaboration and networking in the sharing of resources and expertise to improve the quality of programmes within the region. One example of such networking could be the sharing of prototypes for the local production of a wide range of teaching/learning materials for use in early childhood programmes. Research has consistently revealed the distressing inadequacies of this programme dimension in the region. Little of significance has been done over the years to address the deficiency. Commercial businesses have not demonstrated an interest in developing or marketing such materials and even so the cost would be prohibitive. Governments could encourage inter-sectoral co-operation to develop the materials, for instance, by encouraging relevant technical and vocational public institutions to streamline their educational programmes to include making of basic educational materials and equipment for supplying day care and preschool facilities at reasonable cost. Recently, the Bernard Van Leer Foundation -sponsored North Coast Project in Jamaica, produced excellent prototype materials for developing readiness skills in children. Efforts are being

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made presently in Jamaica to produce these on a larger scale for purchase by early childhood programmes. Certainly regional collaboration with regard to copyrighting, would mean legitimate inter-country sharing of already developed models which would reduce total production costs. This idea could also be extended to include the adaptation of materials from other countries outside of the region.

Conclusion

With creative thinking, there are several other areas of collaborative problem -solving which might emerge. At the regional conference in April, an atmosphere of hope and co-operation prevailed. Delegates were more than keen on a regional approach to moving forward. The process of looking inward to find appropriate solutions to the persistent problem of poor programme quality seemed to have begun in earnest. Countries have committed themselves to address the specific developmental issues pertaining to quality of early childhood provisions contained in the Plan of Action, at the local level and to report on progress at the next regional conference to be held in Jamaica in 1999. The CARICOM Secretariat has also committed itself to facilitating any regional collaborative efforts aimed at strengthening regional and local capacities to provide on a sustainable basis, child development programmes of good quality. Countries in the region might not be able to achieve the ideal, but relative programme quality is a reasonable expectation. It is the collaborative approach which will convert this expectation into future reality.

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